

## **U.S. must boost support for passenger rail system -- by**

**Arthur Frommer**

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Enemies of Amtrak are fond of arguing that the United States is different from Europe, that we lack the human density that would make a widespread rail system sensible. They are apparently unaware of the growth of a nation of more than 303 million people. In densely populated areas, use of train transportation is just as sensible and feasible as anywhere in Europe.

Take out a map of the United States. Starting at the northernmost tip of the Midwest, draw a somewhat jagged line starting at Duluth, Minn., and proceeding downward through Minneapolis; Des Moines, Iowa; Omaha, Neb.; Kansas City; Joplin, Mo.; Tulsa, Okla.; Oklahoma City; Fort Worth, Texas; Austin, Texas; and San Antonio. Everything to the east of that line — nearly half the United States — is a place of intense population density growing "thicker" by the day.

Now add to that vast swath the southernmost area of the Sunbelt, going across the bottom of the country to San Diego and then up the West Coast to Seattle. That, too, is a place of population density that could well support an efficient rail system.

Recently, the National Association of Railroad Passengers, which has fought for 40 years to extend and expand Amtrak, published a map (at [narprail.org](http://narprail.org) ; click Info & Links then NARP's Vision for the Future) showing the railroad routes it would add to the existing network of passenger tracks. The web of rail lines that resulted are found in the population-dense areas I have just described. If these new routes were to be built for high-speed trains, we would have something close to an adequate rail system, and we would not have to cram our airports with anxious passengers sweating out delays and cancellations that now afflict air traffic. We would restore a decent quality of travel life — and greatly improve our own lives. And we would do this for a fraction of the money we now spend on extending highways.

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unaware of the growth of a nation of more than 303 million people. In densely populated areas, use of train transportation is just as sensible and feasible as anywhere in Europe.

Ross Capon, head of the NARP, told me that the government appropriates an average of \$40 billion a year for highway construction and maintenance and that when you add the innumerable state and city projects of road construction, you find that the nation spends as much as \$200 billion a year for roads and highways. By contrast, we spend slightly more than \$1 billion a year on Amtrak — barely enough to keep it operating.

It's interesting how Amtrak opponents refer to its "bad service" but never point out the system's limited budget. They also fail to acknowledge that freight trains have priority on railroad lines and that most Amtrak delays occur when passenger trains are made to sit on a siding and wait until the favored freight cars go through.

Other Amtrak opponents point out that it lacks competition — as if private railroads eagerly await to transport passengers. Where are those entrepreneurs? Would they really agree to operate passenger rail without receiving a subsidy from the federal government? No major train system anywhere in the world — including the private companies in England — operates totally without government support.

At a time when our reliance on expensive foreign oil is among the most serious problems we face, it is absurd to favor highways and starve Amtrak.

In November, only a few of us will have the chance to vote on the re-election of U.S. senators who have sought to prevent Amtrak from receiving adequate support. But we can at least contact friends who have that opportunity.

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